

CALIFORNIA MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION REDUCTION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Definitions for Consideration

This document presents a variety of definitions relevant to addressing the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness for consideration by the Advisory Committee.¹

Stigma

- “Stigma refers to attitudes and beliefs that motivate individuals to fear, reject and avoid those who are labeled, diagnosed or perceived to have a serious mental illness – often anyone who is seen as ‘different.’”²
- Stigma exists when five interrelated components converge: (1) “people distinguish and label human differences;” (2) “dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes;” (3) “labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of ‘us’ from ‘them;’” (4) “labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes;” and (5) stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.” Therefore, the term “stigma” is applied within the context of a power situation.³
- Stigma exists when two fundamental elements are met: 1) recognizing a differentiating “mark” (condition), and 2) the subsequent devaluation of the person.⁴
- Stigma involves people making unfair moral judgments about other people.⁵
- For children, being stigmatized means feeling pain, disgrace, or shame, as well as feeling different and worrying about ridicule or bullying from classmates, friends, or even their families.⁶
- Stigma is “negative attitudes about persons with mental illness. Attitudes combine seemingly factual statements that represent real world observations...with values or emotional reactions to the fact...Emotional reactions can be either positive or negative.”⁷
- “According to the United States Surgeon General, ‘stigmatization of people with mental disorders has persisted throughout history. It is manifested by bias, distrust, stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger and/or avoidance. Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders, especially severe disorders such as schizophrenia. It reduces access to resources and opportunities (e.g. housing, jobs) and leads to low self esteem, isolation and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking, and wanting to pay for, care. In its more overt and egregious form, stigma results in outright discrimination and abuse. More tragically, it deprives people of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society’ (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

Discrimination

- “Discrimination occurs when people and societies *act* upon their feelings of rejection and discomfort with mental illness by depriving those associated with it the rights and life opportunities that are afforded to all other people.”⁸
- “Discrimination means unfair treatment, and involves any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference”⁹ that “has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms.”¹⁰
- “Discrimination refers to the way people living with mental illness are treated, intentionally or unintentionally, due to stigma. People with mental illness are often treated with disrespect, experiencing such behaviors as exclusion, bullying, aggression, ridicule and devaluation. Such discrimination can result in limits and barriers to many of life’s opportunities.”¹¹
- Discrimination is the “behavioral action that results from prejudice. It represents the unfortunate ways people act when they believe and agree with a negative stereotype.”¹²

Social Inclusion & Social Exclusion

- In an overview of voting rights for people with mental illness, the authors suggest that “social inclusion” means “equality of opportunity to access and participation in the rudimentary and fundamental functions of society,” including healthcare access, employment, education, good housing, recovery of status and meaning, and reduced impact of disability.¹³
- In contrast, in the UK, the Prime Minister set up a Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in December 1997. The SEU defines “social exclusion” as “a shorthand for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.”¹⁴
- “Social exclusion means that a person is not able to take part as they would like in society and does not have the same opportunities that other people have.”¹⁵
- “Social exclusion can be defined as a series of interconnected problems around poverty, discrimination, unemployment, low skills, bad housing and poor health.”¹⁶

REFERENCES CITED

- ¹ This information was compiled by Kirsten Deichert, California Department of Mental Health, based upon a review of existing literature on stigma, discrimination, and mental illness.
- ² Same definition of *stigma* used in two documents: (a) California Department of Mental Health (2007). *Mental Health Services Act Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) Stigma and Discrimination Report Fact Sheet*. (b) Mental Health Services Oversight & Accountability Commission (2007). *Eliminating Stigma and Discrimination Against Persons with Mental Health Disabilities: A Project of the California Mental Health Services Act*, p. 7.
- ³ Link, B.G., Phelan, J.C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363-385.
- ⁴ Arboleda-Flórez, J. (2002). What causes stigma? *World Psychiatry*, 1(1), 25-26.
- ⁵ Health Scotland, a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre (2005). *Stigma: A Guidebook for Action*, p. 2.
- ⁶ Levesque, P., Schachter, H. (2006). Sticks and Stones: Breaking the stigma of child and youth mental health difficulties through our schools. *Voices for Children*, Ottawa, Canada, p. 3.
- ⁷ Corrigan, P., Lundin, R. (2001). *Don't Call Me Nuts! Coping with the Stigma of Mental Illness*. Champaign Illinois: Recovery Press, p. 19.
- ⁸ Same definition of *discrimination* used in two documents: (a) California Department of Mental Health (2007). *Mental Health Services Act Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) Stigma and Discrimination Report Fact Sheet*. (b) Mental Health Services Oversight & Accountability Commission (2007). *Eliminating Stigma and Discrimination Against Persons with Mental Health Disabilities: A Project of the California Mental Health Services Act*, p. 8.
- ⁹ Corrigan, P. et al. (2001)
- ¹⁰ UN Human Rights Committee, General comment 18(37), as cited in Health Scotland (2005) above.
- ¹¹ Mental Health Commission of Canada (2008). *Countering Stigma and Discrimination: Operational Plan: Version 3*, p. 4.
- ¹² Corrigan, P. et. al. (2001)
- ¹³ Nash, M. (2002). Voting as a means of social inclusion for people with a mental illness. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 9, 697-703.
- ¹⁴ Social Exclusion Unit (1998). *Preventing Social Exclusion: Social Exclusion and Why it Matters*, 1-12. <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/>
- ¹⁵ Health Scotland, a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre (2005). *Stigma: A Guidebook for Action*, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Rankin, J. (2005). *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*. Mental Health in the Mainstream, Working Paper Two, p. 1.